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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 AMMAN 001737

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: JORDANIAN CIVIL SOCIETY REPS QUESTION U.S. STAYING
POWER ON DEMOCRATIC REFORM

Classified By: CDA David Hale for reasons 1.5 (b) (d)

SUMMARY

1. Jordanian civil society reps told U/S Grossman March 3 that they supported reforms in the Middle East, but saw deep mistrust of U.S. motives among Arabs. Most doubted the ability of the U.S. to carry through on its commitments to democratic reform. Many asked that the U.S. not impose ideas from outside, although one thought that the West should encourage faster reform. All mentioned that a just solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict was central to regional perceptions of U.S. motives, U.S. credibility, and the success of reform efforts in the region. END SUMMARY

WE SUPPORT REFORM IN PRINCIPLE, BUT...

2. (C) U/S Marc Grossman met with a group of Jordanian NGO and civil society activists in Amman March 3 to discuss how to promote and support reform in the region. He outlined the key principles underpinning his trip: the best ideas will come from the region; real, lasting reform takes time and is never completely finished; the Greater Middle East initiative (GME) is not a substitute for progress in the Arab-Israeli conflict, but the conflict should not be an excuse to postpone reform; the U.S. is acting now because the conversation on reform in the region has already begun and will not stop.

SHORT U.S. ATTENTION SPAN CREATES MONSTERS

3. (C) The groups responses followed several themes. All supported in general the idea of reform in the Middle East, and agreed that while there is a conversation on democracy and reform, it lagged far behind the rest of the world. Nearly all, however, expressed strong doubts about the ability of the USG to follow through on its rhetoric to support reform in the Middle East, or regain the credibility it needs to press its ideas. One journalist commented that, when the U.S. is forced to choose between its interests and its principles, "its interests always win."

4. (C) Several participants argued that U.S. policies in the region create monsters because the U.S. loses interest and fails to complete its job. Usama Bin Laden, several argued, was "made in America" as a convenient tool to use against the Soviet Union. Once the Cold War was won, the U.S. merely cast him aside: "if you raise a lion cub then let it loose in the neighborhood, it will attack the neighbors, and maybe even you." Others echoed these thoughts with regard to Saddam Hussein, whom most believed the U.S. had supported in the 1980's as a counterweight to the Islamic revolution in Iran. Again, according to this argument, when Iran was weakened, the U.S. lost focus on Iraq, and Saddam was permitted to develop WMD and invade Kuwait. The group feared that the U.S. reform effort could also end badly for the region. A human rights activist said that most Arabs understand the term democracy to mean free elections, and democratic reforms run the risk of replacing "the tyranny of an individual with the tyranny of the majority."

NO TO IMPOSITION OF DEMOCRACY

5. (C) Nearly all participant asked the U.S. not to impose reforms on the region. This, they argued, could lead to a popular backlash that would undermine the reforms themselves. Even if the U.S. seeks to consult, one academic noted, the size and power of the U.S. "on the receiving end is overwhelming" and makes even friendly advice seem like dictates. While most Arabs believe that reform and democracy are needed, most also reject the Western model of democracy because of popular objections to U.S. policy and "hegemony" in the region. The lack of U.S. credibility in the region is a major impediment to the success of democratic reform.

6. (C) One academic disagreed and said he would be disappointed if the U.S. was seeking to support only locally

produced reforms. "If you wait for us to democratize, reform will take too long." He encouraged the U.S. to push the governments of the region toward faster and deeper change.

U.S. POLICIES HAVE HURT DEMOCRACY IN THE REGION

17. (C) Many Arabs believe that the U.S. is "better off without democracy" in the region because it can more easily manipulate dictatorial regimes, and therefore question the sincerity of the U.S. initiative. The U.S., several argued, has historically supported regimes in the Middle East that repressed free political expression. One businessman noted that he was taught by his parents never to go into politics even in a time of political openness because that openness always ended, and those who went too far were always punished -- they would be jailed, or they and their families would never be permitted to establish a good career. It will take time for Arabs to get over their mistrust of the U.S., and of their own governments.

...AND DON'T FORGET ISRAEL-PALESTINE

18. (C) Most participants agreed that "the core of our problem is the Israeli-Palestinian conflict," which the U.S. must address if the GME is to have any credibility. For many years, one academic argued, Arab regimes supported by the U.S. told their people that they had to sacrifice political and economic development in order to "solve the Arab-Israeli problem through arms." Arabs were told that democratic reform and economic prosperity would come after a "just" settlement. Much of the anger at the U.S., a former diplomat argued, is due to "the undeserved support of the U.S. for Israel." "The belief that ignorance and backwardness are the source of terrorism is wrong: they only provide a source for recruitment," but the Arab-Israeli conflict drives Arab anger.

FOCUS ON WOMEN

19. (C) One women's right activist asked that the U.S. focus the GME on women "not only as half the population, but as those who raise the other half of the population, including suicide bombers." She wondered what kind of values the mothers of suicide bombers had taught them in their childhood, and hoped that women educated to be modern and tolerant would teach their children those same principles.

PARTICIPANTS

110. (U) U.S.

U/S Marc Grossman
Amb. Edward W. Gnehm
NSC Staffer Dan Fried
NEA DAS Alina Romanowski
EUR A/DAS Glyn Davies
P Special Assistant Jonathan Carpenter
A/DCM Doug Silliman (notetaker)
PAO Haynes Mahoney

JORDAN

Nancy Bakir, Women's Rights Activist and human rights advisor to the PM
Dr. Mohammad Kheir Mustafa, Professor, Jordan University
Amb. Hassan Abu Nimeh, former Jordanian PermRep to the UN, New York
Jamal Tahat, NGO head and Director, Strategic Studies Center, National Defense College
Nidal Mansour, Committee for the Defense of the Freedom of Journalists
Bassem Sakijha, Transparency International, columnist
Walid al-Turk, World Affairs Council, businessman

111. (U) U/S Grossman has cleared this message.

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HALE